

Ben Eklof

SOVIET BRIEFING

Gorbachev and
the Reform Period



Westview Press

Soviet Briefing

Gorbachev and the Reform Period

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Westview Press
Boulder, San Francisco, and London

To Nadya, Toma, and Emma

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Ben Eklof

Note on Transliteration

The transliteration of Russian names and words is always problematic. I have used a modified version of the Library of Congress system (without the diacritical mark) but have, rather idiosyncratically, replaced *ii* at the end of proper names with *y*, and otherwise yielded to spellings that I judged have become common in the West.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes:

BS	<i>Baltimore Sun</i>
CDSP	<i>Current Digest of the Soviet Press</i>
CSM	<i>Christian Science Monitor</i>
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
RL	<i>Radio Liberty Research Bulletin</i>
WP	<i>Washington Post</i>
WSJ	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>

I have provided a full citation for each source when it first appears in each chapter, with the exception of a few works cited throughout the text that I believe would have been tedious to reproduce over and over.

Ne réveillez pas le chat qui dort.

—Alexander Herzen

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1

Introduction

The year 1987 in Soviet affairs was tumultuous and exciting in a way few could have anticipated. From the January plenum to the Washington summit, from the remarkable Shmelev assault on virtually all the canons of the Stalinist system to the Yeltsin affair, 1987 stands out in its intensity, exceeding even 1982 (the year of Andropov's accession) and 1985 (when Gorbachev came to power) as a year fraught with significance for the course of affairs in the world's largest country.

And 1988 seems to be tumbling along in even more boisterous fashion. Glasnost has unfolded with such rapidity that words spoken or written a year ago that seemed bold and outspoken then have already become tame, common wisdom. The conservative onslaught, culminating in the now infamous Andreyeva letter, and followed (after a distressing, anxiety-ridden period of silence) by a powerful refutation, then gave way to renewed and vastly expanded calls for radical changes in all areas of society and the polity. Events reached an unprecedented state of frenzy as the June Conference approached and the Central Committee presented Theses for the further reconstruction of the Soviet Union. The Conference was so fervently awaited that the May summit meeting between Mikhail S. Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in Moscow was left in the shadows of public attention.

Gorbachev's policies have coalesced under four headings: *perestroika* (restructuring, transformation); *glasnost* (openness, "telling it like it is"); *demokratizatsiia*; and in foreign policy, *novoe myshlenie* (new political thinking).¹ Not accidentally, with the clarification of policy has come not only a consolidation of power, as revealed in the January and June plenums, but also a stiffening of resistance, expressed most forcefully at the October plenum (after which Gorbachev enthusiast Boris Yeltsin resigned under a cloud). In early 1988, as the momentous June Conference approached, Gorbachev seemed to have triumphed over opposition at the top and had positioned himself to push

through even more radical measures at the Conference, but he had found no magic formula to overcome bureaucratic footdragging, especially at the local level. Recent events are a reminder that, as Andrei Sakharov noted, "there is a clear distinction between what Gorbachev says and what the Central Committee approves, and a still greater gap between what they approve, and what happens in real life."²

In politics and culture, reform has not yet been institutionalized, remaining, in the opinion of some, "atmospheric, cosmetic, and reversible."³ Changes have been *de facto* rather than *de jure*. Nevertheless, just as the sheer scope of glasnost has been breathtaking, so now it is difficult to imagine how any leader could fully restore what was before, under Brezhnev.

After the January and June plenums, the reforms pushed through in June 1987, and the lifting of taboos on virtually all topics, "Gorbachev has passed the point of no return."⁴ With the New Economic Mechanism, a plan to introduce cost-accounting and self-financing throughout the Soviet economy (beginning January 1, 1988, and scheduled to be implemented throughout the country by 1991), an economic transformation of virtually unprecedented scope is under way.⁵ No less fascinating or significant is the Soviet attempt "at one and the same time . . . to recover its memory and the capacity to speak with more than one voice; [the Soviet Union] is learning to remember and to debate."⁶

Columnist Joseph Harsch writes that Gorbachev has "reformed, even revolutionized, Soviet foreign policy."⁷ *Novoe myshlenie*⁸ involves assertions of global interdependence over the class perspective and, despite Gorbachev's emphasis on U.S.-Soviet relations,⁹ a simultaneous focus upon "multipolarity" in international relations¹⁰ and a willingness to deal with regional issues on their own merits. Proponents of New Thinking also eschew attempts to export violent revolution¹¹ and "advocate that local and regional conflicts be more effectively insulated from the East-West rivalry."¹² They condemn the "arrogance of omniscience" in relations with Soviet allies and the "presumption of infallibility" in foreign affairs and put a new emphasis on political approaches and solutions instead of military ones.¹³ Militarily, New Thinking has involved renunciation of the view that capitalist powers inevitably tend toward militarism and the ascendancy of a new doctrine calling for "reasonable sufficiency"¹⁴ and "mutual security" rather than parity or supremacy. It accepts asymmetrical cuts¹⁵ in conventional and nuclear forces in the interest of arms treaties. Visiting Czechoslovakia in April 1987, Gorbachev himself "implicitly admitted that the Soviet military buildup had created areas in which the Soviet forces were 'superior' and argued explicitly for eliminating these asymmetries by reducing Soviet forces rather than by permitting an American and NATO buildup."¹⁶

The Soviet Union has also been refurbishing its image at the United Nations. It has quietly complied with U.S. demands to reduce its staff;¹⁷ in October 1987 it paid off \$111 million in current bills¹⁸ and promised to pay back \$197

million more in peacekeeping debts dating back over 30 years. In 1988 the Soviet Union has also begun to pick up the slack left by the U.S. withdrawal of funding from UN family-planning programs. It has made an eleven-point proposal to strengthen the effectiveness of the United Nations and the powers of the Security Council. In *Pravda* (September 17, 1987) Gorbachev called for new efforts by the UN to reduce Third World debt, improve world health, and tackle environmental problems. The Kremlin has urged new functions for the UN, including investigating acts of international terrorism, verifying arms control agreements, and monitoring human rights across the globe. Gorbachev has called for new means to make UN resolutions "binding." Moscow may well "want a stronger United Nations to help extricate it from numerous third world conflicts with a minimum loss of face."¹⁹ Finally, the Kremlin has proposed cooperation with several Western governments in combating international terrorism, including negotiating extradition treaties for the return of terrorists.²⁰

Previously unthinkable, too, was the idea of a party secretary rejecting the notion of infallibility in relations with Eastern Europe, reconsidering the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968,²¹ even of learning from these countries (especially the Hungarian economy). If initially Gorbachev adopted a stern line and was primarily interested in the stabilization of conditions in Eastern Europe, in the past year he has clearly been trying to enlist the leaders of Eastern Europe in his reform program, even to prod them on. (His speeches have been censored, especially in Romania, and circulate among the population in semi-clandestine manner.) The most plausible explanation for this shift in approach is that during his first year Gorbachev was engrossed in consolidating his authority, at a time when stability was highly desirable in Eastern Europe. Now that he has turned to actively promoting a reform agenda, a major component of his economic renewal will be the improvement of the quality of goods coming from Eastern Europe and a general activation of trade, which will best be served by parallel economic and political reforms.²²

Skeptics point out that glasnost has not extended to foreign policy discussion in the press and that "there has been no overt repudiation of Brezhnevism in foreign relations." Is the New Thinking merely "tactical and deceptive . . . the latest example of the strategy of *reculer pour mieux sauter*?" As Peter Reddaway argues, such an argument may well be used internally as a justification for reform made within higher circles in Moscow: "But it seems . . . wiser to regard the USSR, for the time being at least, as a great power pursuing great power interests, i.e., to take Gorbachev's claim at its face value."²³

The Sources and Their Limitations

Frankly, we are all too breathless from these events to fully trust our own judgment at this time. But nothing much would be ventured in asserting that events of the past eighteen months have irreversibly altered the face (and perhaps

the soul) of the Soviet Union. What happens in the Soviet Union, however we interpret it, will weigh heavily in the course of world affairs. Although historians prefer to wait until time ripens a new perspective and are rightly wary of premature analysis, the task of sifting evidence and integrating events should not be left exclusively to those concerned primarily with the present. This book represents an attempt to chronicle the events of a period that will, I am sure, ultimately rank with others perhaps less monumental than the revolutionary year of 1917 (itself the most significant conjuncture of the twentieth century) but nevertheless marking real turning points in Russian and Soviet—and perhaps global—history. I have in mind 1929 (the year in which Stalin's collectivization drive was launched); 1956 (the beginning of de-Stalinization); and, reaching back, 1861 (the Emancipation and Great Reforms of Alexander II). With perhaps only a small degree of wishful thinking, Nikolai Shmelev observed in June: "In terms of the hopes that they have aroused and in terms of their depth, frankness and boldness, the past two years' discussions of our problems have constituted a genuine rebirth of our public thought and national self-awareness. The 27th Party Congress (January 1986) marked the beginning of revolutionary changes in our society."²⁴

This work began as a personal endeavor to sort things out, to comprehend what is happening in what is surely the most interesting country in the world right now. I aim for a measure of clarity and accuracy rather than originality—though I do assert my own opinions. I build upon the research and observations of others, including journalists and specialists here and in the Soviet Union. I also base my own observations upon nearly five years spent in the USSR, three of them working for a Soviet publishing firm, and upon the ongoing research I carry out for a course on contemporary Soviet society taught at Indiana University. Undoubtedly, some of what I say here will come unraveled in the near future, but I believe the situation I depict reflects both immediate events and some of the deeper forces at work.

Why not begin with the 27th Party Congress, or with Gorbachev's coming to power on March 10, 1985, or with Yuri Andropov, or with the death of Brezhnev? The reader will detect a note of inconsistency in my approach, for one of the themes elaborated below is that the new periodization imposed on recent history by proponents of *perestroika*—contrasting the time of *zastoi*, or stagnation, with the new era of *uskorenie*, or acceleration—is self-serving and inaccurate. Put simply, this perspective ignores the beginnings of the reform process in education, agriculture, industry, and even culture that reach back well into the 1970s. Moreover, it improperly frames events by overlooking evolutionary processes independent of the political structure. Specifically it overlooks the emergence of a "civil society," which has recently been identified by Robert Tucker, S. Frederick Starr, and others.

My reasons for beginning in 1987 are opportunistic: There is simply no way both to keep abreast of events and to reach back far into the quickly receding

past. Others have provided brilliant analyses of the "sea changes" taking place in the past generation (Moshe Lewin, Robert Tucker) and have offered cogent interpretations of the events of the first two years of Gorbachev's rule (Jerry Hough, Thane Gustafson, Seweryn Bialer, Archie Brown, Tim Colton, Peter Reddaway). Still others are interpreting developments in individual sectors: for instance, Murray Feshbach's studies of the health-care system; Louise Shelley's works on crime; Beatrice Szekely's and John Dunstan's analyses of education—to name but a few. The pages of *Current History* (annually, the October issue), *Soviet Economy*, *Soviet Studies*, the *Harriman Institute Forum*, and *Problems of Communism* are rich with contemporary analysis. But the published works of leading scholars lag, generally, a year or so behind events, while synopses of recent events make no attempt at interpretation.

This endeavor represents an uneasy compromise between the mission of the journalist to report and the task of the historian and social analyst to ponder, reflect, and place in perspective. I have relied heavily upon the vast, and largely reliable, Western corps of analysts who pore over the Soviet press and produce summaries, translations, and surveys in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin* and on the pages of the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *The Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and other periodicals.

I read Russian fluently and follow closely several Soviet publications. But, as Soviet analyst and guru Murray Feshbach has pointed out, the project of studying the Soviet Union has changed fundamentally in three short years. Instead of poring through unremittingly boring, repetitious publications looking for occasional and rare nuggets of information from which more general conclusions about the quality of Soviet life can be extrapolated, we now have a torrent of revelations on virtually every aspect of Soviet society, making it impossible for any single scholar to keep fully informed.

As a result, it will take years to fully absorb the riches now available, not to mention comprehend the complicated processes at work.²⁵ My strategy has been to rely, in the first instance, upon available translations, abstracts, and analyses of the Soviet press. When I found an abstract or translation interesting, I went back to the original. In this way I learned of the works of Vasily Seliunin, Andrei Nuikin, Shmelev, and others cited often below.

This strategy is the only way to keep abreast of events. Unfortunately, it also allows the biases of the Western intelligence community, Sovietologists (many American specialists are not aware that this word in Russian—*sovetolog*—has a strongly pejorative flavor), and journalists to affect the initial sorting and selection of material to be analyzed. For example, Radio Liberty gives a disproportionate amount of attention to human rights, religious issues, and problems in Soviet society and the economy. At times, it takes a positive delight in highlighting the ills besetting the USSR.²⁶

The inundation of Western academia with intellectuals from the Third Wave

of Soviet emigration in the 1970s has also been a mixed blessing with a marked impact on Soviet studies. Many of these emigrés, personally seared by political repression, the humiliations of the process of emigration, and anti-Semitism in the USSR, have adopted an unremittingly hostile, even Manichean view of their former homeland. As Jerry Hough also pointed out, the Soviet education process itself, by instilling the viewpoint that "you are either with us or against us," that there is only one Marxist perspective and one socialism, inadvertently encourages the kind of uncompromising rejection of all aspects of Soviet Marxist ideology that one often encounters among these emigrés. The virtual absence in Soviet education of any discussion of "middle-level" theories in social analysis, of sociological thought in the Weberian or Durkheimian traditions, leaves many emigrés without coherent intellectual strategies or vocabulary (except a curiously inverted Marxism-Leninism) to deal with the complex issues they must often address as "experts" on their own country. Thus, Gail Lapidus writes of the "poverty of socio-political thought" in the USSR, "a poverty which extends even to the Soviet emigration."²⁷ The most salient impact of this Third Wave has been to substantially augment conservative, hard-line approaches to Soviet politics.

My approach also leaves me dependent upon Western correspondents serving in Moscow. Few American journalists arrive in the Soviet Union with an adequate command of Russian (or other Soviet languages) and most have but a superficial knowledge of the cultures, histories, and societies involved. To their credit, most do a credible, and some do a very good, job, but more in-depth prior training would certainly enhance their reporting. Even when correspondents speak the language, the difficulties Western journalists have obtaining information or access to sources are daunting.

This situation may finally be changing. Newspaper editors, academics, and others are now far more willing to talk to journalists, and unofficial sources no longer fear to meet with journalists. The Soviet press, according to returning *Washington Post* correspondent Celestine Bohlen, is "a far greater asset to Western reporters than ever before." And Western reporters are "inching toward a situation where they are being required to be reporters in the old-fashioned sense of the word."²⁸ Yet, Bohlen continues, there is still little "openness" about high-level political battles, and Western journalists are "still hampered by the hysteria of the Moscow intelligentsia." Western journalists still cannot travel freely about the country, and the foreign press were excluded from the proceedings of the momentous June Party Conference.

Glasnost notwithstanding, then, the proceedings of the core institutions of the system—the Politburo, the Secretariat, and the Central Committee, to name the most important—remain wrapped in secrecy. To mention but one example, the Yeltsin affair remains clouded in mystery. The events of the key Central Committee meeting of October 1987 are still unpublished, and the various versions of Yeltsin's speech floating about (and even read out loud at street

gatherings in Moscow in June 1988) remain unauthenticated. It is undoubtedly true that the range of public discussion and disagreement among the leadership is much greater now than it was only a few years ago (though the scope of policy options discussed within channels has always been at least as great as that offered in our own two-party system). But the veil of obscurity clouding the political process—narrowly understood as power relations and policy disputes in the party and bureaucracy—has not been lifted here as it has over the workings of society. Another recent example: *Pravda's* summary of the supremely important Politburo meeting occurring two days after the June Party Conference merely listed the committees set up to implement the Conference resolutions and concluded with the laconic comment that "at the session, certain other questions concerning party affairs and public matters were discussed."²⁹ For this reason, and given the uniquely vertical nature of communications, the centralization of institutions and resources, and the enormous weight of the Soviet state, the real limitations to glasnost pose a major obstacle. The reader should understand that unsubstantiated rumor and rather brazen speculation continue to play a major role in the analysis of *kto-kogo*, or power relations in the Kremlin.

In short, there are real limitations to the sources I have employed. There will be a temptation to focus upon events and personalities rather than upon deeper structures (in particular, in the political arena), to consider religious and human rights issues out of proportion to their real significance in Soviet life today. There is, unfortunately, an inevitable focus on Moscow to the exclusion of the provinces. The concerns of the intelligentsia (glasnost, pluralism, and professional dignity) remain at center stage. Anxiety about the fate of perestroika comes through, both because of this "Moscow hysteria" and because of Western skepticism about the possibilities of mixed economic systems. The remnants of a built-in corrosive skepticism about motivations (nobody but time-serving hacks could possibly serve in such a system) can also be detected. But the task of finding out what is going on is by no means hopeless, and it is infinitely interesting.

Perspectives

I am trained as a historian, of the Imperial period at that. In an informal talk given at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies in mid-1988, Robert Tucker rued the lack of historical perspective in Soviet studies and, in particular, the widespread insensitivity to the prerevolutionary history of the Russian Empire. This informal comment I use, quite shamelessly, to rummage about in affairs of the present.

A genuine understanding of contemporary events in the Soviet Union must incorporate both density of detail and a historical perspective; it must include cultural, political, economic, but also societal spheres. I assume, as a social

historian, that to understand the forces at work in the Soviet Union today we must look beyond the power struggles at the top and understand that change in the USSR has always been a process of negotiation between leaders and basic social groups. Although the unique centralization of the Soviet system cannot be overlooked, Western historians have, in the past generation, been critical of approaches to Russian history that treat the state as prime mover and ignore the interplay between politics and evolutionary social change. History written "from below" has insights to add to the study of the contemporary Soviet Union.

As a historian I assume, too, that domestic and foreign events are interconnected. Most historians of foreign policy have rejected the value of investigating diplomacy in isolation from the internal life of a country, and in the case of Russia, the impact of foreign affairs upon domestic concerns has been powerful. The interplay of defeat in war and internal reform is a theme in Russian history reaching back at least to the time of Peter the Great. Fear that Russia's great power status was eroding led to the Great Reforms of the 1860s, and dread that Russia would slip back to the status of "an India or China" prompted another spurt of internal reforms at the turn of the century. The belief that a pluralistic, decentralized Russia would be incapable of keeping up with its rivals was a powerful ideological weapon in the struggle of the tsars to enlist support against the imposition of limitations upon autocracy. Discouraged by the failure of reform at home, Russian tsars often turned to the foreign arena in an attempt to leave their mark upon history. And Russia's cultural and political history has been deeply colored by its relations with the West.

Because events far outpaced my ability to keep abreast, I reluctantly decided to omit discussion of foreign policy issues. Future editions of *Soviet Briefing* will remedy this shortcoming. Unfortunately, this means passing over in silence an area in which Gorbachev has made extraordinary initiatives (toward Europe, the United States, and China), some notable gains, while simultaneously enhancing his own prestige at home. We must overlook Eastern Europe, an area extremely sensitive to the currents of change within the Soviet Union and posing significant dangers for Gorbachev,³⁰ but where we also see the extraordinary spectacle of a "Soviet leader with a genuine popular following among some segments of the East European public." One might well argue that discussion of Eastern Europe should be included with ethnic issues in a larger chapter on minorities in the last colonial empire—the issues are that interwoven.³¹

A Distinctiveness Not Warranted By the Facts

The most powerful message of Hedrick Smith's *The Russians*, published in the early 1970s and selling more copies than all academic works on the Soviet Union since World War II combined, was that Soviet society and polity are but variants of the prerevolutionary political culture. We must be aware of Russia's

distinct historical tradition and unique geopolitical legacy; of its role in the world economy and culture as a "perpetual latecomer"; of the distinct imprint made by its semicolonial and dependent status at the turn of the century (and the burden imposed to catch up militarily in order to regain the status of a great power).

At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that the processes of modernization have created patterns with marked resemblances to those obtaining in much of the developed world. Although I believe that history has left a deep imprint on popular culture and contemporary institutions in the Soviet Union, much of what we ascribe to "Russian tradition" is merely the residue of a vanishing peasant culture, which itself had much in common with peasant culture throughout the globe. This peasant culture, still vital and intact after 1917, was both undermined and preserved (in warped fashion) during Stalin's forced and brutal transformation of the country, and we can detect its imprint in attitudes toward work, authority, and even self in the culture today. But the transformation wrought by urbanization, industrialization, and universal secondary education is today etched far more deeply in Soviet society than are these increasingly faint residues of the past.

This perspective, long argued by Cyril Black, has recently been vigorously asserted by distinguished scholars such as Frederick Starr, Robert Tucker, and Moshe Lewin, who have emphasized the gradual emergence of a "civil society" in the Soviet Union and the pressure this society is now exerting upon the polity to adapt. Soviet nationalities expert Ralph Clem argues that "Western scholars have attributed a uniqueness to Soviet society on the assumption that a 'totalitarian' state is capable of decisively controlling basic social processes," an assumption now regarded with great skepticism. He insists: "We in the West have tended to impute to Soviet society a distinctiveness that is not usually warranted by the facts."³² While conceding that the concept of civil society most forcefully described in the writings of John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Alexander de Tocqueville (grounded in ideals of freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and religion, and holding that society is distinct from government) has little precedent in Russian political culture, Starr believes that "civil society in the Soviet Union will be shaped by Russian traditions, just as those in Great Britain and France bear the very different mark of their national heritages." But, he adds, "Starkly different structures can fulfill similar functions. To acknowledge the differentness of Russia's political heritage does not disqualify it from experiencing evolutionary change."³³

I assume, too, that despite the fundamentally different ways the societies are ordered, Soviet politicians (and the public at large) function with roughly the same mixture of self-interest, opportunism, and ideals as we see around us in the West. It is a measure of the depth of our animosity to that country that such a pedestrian statement need be made. To believe otherwise, however, is, as George F. Kennan Jr. has repeatedly pointed out, to make the most radical and